

Underground Houston Day Trip - September 16, 2019

by Lawson Cook



Our group of TIHAA members and guests set out from Bayland Park on the Harris County bus at about 9:15 am for our outing to a part of Houston that few residents have ever visited, the Tunnel System in downtown Houston. Have you ever wondered why there are very few people on the streets in downtown during the workday? Well, all the downtown workers are mostly underground, escaping the heat, humidity and hurricanes. It's nice and air conditioned down there.

On the way to downtown, of course **Mary Brown** had Bingo cards for everyone to play a few hands of Bingo for \$2 bills. Our Bingo winners were Velma, Patty and Cathy. To make sure that we got our minimum daily required sugar high, she handed out bags of candy.

Our guide, Keith Rosen, has led tours of Houston since 1985. He taught history for 14 years at Houston Community College. He was like having a history library in our pocket as we navigated through the downtown and into the Tunnel System. He showed us things that most people miss as we went along our route.

Following is a summary of our three hour walk through the tunnels, as provided by Houston Historical Tours.

Our tour went through the red, light purple, and dark blue tunnels. It went by about 2 dozen shops and restaurants. On the walk from City Hall to the



location of the tunnel entrance, we heard narratives of and saw works of John Portman, Cesar Pelli, Ralph Adams Cram, and John Eberson and structures from the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 2000s, and 2010s. We went in the:

- 71-floor, 992 feet/302 meters tall Wells Fargo Plaza, formerly the Allied Bank Plaza from 1983. It is the second tallest building in Houston and Texas. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) were the architects.
- 36-floor, 523 feet/159 meters tall Pennzoil Place at 711 Louisiana Street from 1975. This is the most award winning building in Houston and is considered the first post-modern building. Philip Johnson (1906 – 2005) was the architect.

We went under the:

- 50-floor, 714 feet/218 meters tall former One Shell Plaza at 910 Louisiana Street from 1971. This was Houston's tallest building from 1971 to 1980.
- 811 Louisiana/777 Walker Street, formerly Two Shell Plaza from 1972.
- Bob Lanier Public Works Building, formerly the Electric Tower at 611 Walker Street from 1968.
- Tranquility Park from 1979.



In addition, we went into the orange tunnels and the:

- 19-floor Mellie Esperson Building at 815 Walker Street from 1942. John Eberson and his son Drew Eberson (1904 – 1989) were the architects.
- 32-floor, 410 feet/125 meters tall Niels Esperson Building AKA the Wedding Cake Building at 808 Travis Street from 1927. John Eberson (1875 – 1954) was the architect. It was the tallest building in Houston for 2 years.

- 36-floor, 428 feet/131 meters tall J. P. Morgan Chase

Building, formerly the Gulf Oil Building, at 712 Main Street from 1929. Alfred Finn (1883 – 1964) was the architect. This was the tallest building in Houston from 1929 to 1963.

- 71-floor, 1,002 feet/305 meters tall J. P. Morgan Chase Tower, formerly Texas Commerce Tower, at 600 Travis Street from 1982. Ioh Ming (I. M.) Pei (1917 – 2019) was the architect. This is the tallest building in Texas.

Our attendees were:

Norma Beier, Bonita Bell, Mary Brown, Mary Camara, Kay Cook, Lawson Cook, Estella Garcia, Ralph Garcia, Leotha Hail, Bill Hoffmeister, Sarah Kovar, Joyce Kover, Brenda Moss, Daryl Moss, Dennis O'Driscoll, Tina O'Driscoll, Cathy Reko, Robert Reko, Patty Rose, Janice Smith, Drew Weaver, Velma Wesley, Irma harding, George Wolf

If you are interested in taking a tour with Houston Historical Tours, their website is www.houstonhistoricaltours.com and their phone number is 713-392 0867